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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a systematic method of obtaining evaluative feedback based on the perceptions of various campus constituencies of a small private liberal arts college's administrative offices. A study was performed, involving two surveys conducted three years apart and using similar forms and procedures. The survey instrument assessed three major dimensions: performance of functions; responsiveness; and overall contribution with the resources available. Both surveys included a random sample of students (1986 n=205; 1989 n=299), as well as faculty (1986 n=122; 1989 n=185), administrators (1986 n=32; 1989 n=99), and support staff (1986 n=158; 1989 n=183). Overall response rates were 78.0% in 1986 and 65.1% in 1989. Respondents provided their perceptions for 44 administrative offices and were asked to list the strengths and weaknesses of each office. Several comparative listings showing the overall performance ratings of the 44 administrative offices evaluated are provided, as well as the change in the ratings from 1986 to 1989. (GLR)

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The Use of Perceptual Data in the Assessment of Administrative Offices

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Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

The assessment of administrative offices has received little attention in the literature. The sheer number of administrative units combined with their diverse functions makes any type of comprehensive assessment very difficult and costly. The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate how perceptual data from various campus constituencies can be used to identify problem areas, which can in turn be examined in a more comprehensive manner. This research is based on two surveys conducted three years apart. The survey instrument was designed to assess each administrative office on three common dimensions. The survey results have provided a good management tool for focusing attention on problem areas. This work should be of interest to practitioners involved in assessment activities.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation and assessment have become one of the major issues for higher education during the last decade. States are mandating reviews, accreditation associations have adopted institutional effectiveness standards, and colleges and universities have scrambled to develop procedures and methods for assessment. While much attention has focused on learning objectives, student outcomes, and academic program reviews, little attention has been given to assessing the support systems that enable the teaching enterprise to function. Most literature references to the assessment of administrative units do not venture beyond generalized statements about the need to evaluate the effectiveness of campus administrative functions. Only recently (Haberaecker, 1990; Brown, 1989; Wilson, 1987; and Gravely and Cochran, 1986) have case studies appeared in the literature. Compared to academic program reviews, there are very few examples of formalized assessment of administrative operations.

The assessment of administrative offices is a difficult task for several reasons. The sheer number of administrative units combined with their diverse functions makes any type of comprehensive assessment very difficult, time consuming, and expensive. Unlike academic units, which tend to have a common mission and standards, it is usually not feasible to conduct a comprehensive evaluation for every administrative office. Several universities have attempted to develop and implement a true comprehensive assessment of administrative functions, but these efforts have apparently not been sustained. For example, Wilson (1987) cites two case studies (University of Calgary and the University of California system) where comprehensive evaluation plans were developed but later collapsed under their own weight. Brown (1989) reports on a very systematic approach to the assessment of non-academic units developed at the University of Maryland and it will be interesting to see if this program is implemented and operated as planned.

As an alternative to the unwieldy comprehensive approach to the assessment of administrative offices, this paper describes a systematic method of obtaining evaluative feedback based on the perceptions of various campus constituencies. While this approach has its limitations, it is an assessment activity that provides very useful information that can be translated into organizational change and improved institutional effectiveness. Perceptual surveys can also be conducted routinely at a modest cost and effort. The use of perceptual data for this purpose is grounded on the idea that the best means of determining the quality of service provided is to ask the consumer. In the case of administrative units on a college campus, consumers are typically faculty, staff, and students. Perceptions and attitudes do provide a measure of effectiveness that is often based on personal experience.

We have found it useful to replicate surveys of campus perceptions of the effectiveness of administrative offices every three years. The survey results (other than written comments) are made public in written reports and presentations to key administrative, faculty, and planning groups on campus. The open sharing of the findings creates a substantial motivating force for improvement and change. In addition to capturing broad-based campus perceptions of individual administrative offices, perceptual surveys also help to describe the view of overall administrative operations and provide feedback on organizational climate issues.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the results of two surveys conducted three years apart using similar forms and procedures. As a small public liberal arts college with approximately 140 full-time faculty, 283 staff, and 3,300 students, it was possible to include all permanent employees in the survey process. Larger institutions could easily substitute random sampling procedures. The first study was conducted in 1986 and had a 78% response rate. The follow-up study was conducted in 1989 and had a 65% response rate. The sampling procedures for the two studies were essentially the same with some minor differences in selecting part-time employees and students.¹ Both surveys included a random sample of students (1986 $n = 205$; 1989 $n=299$).²

The survey instrument was designed to assess three major dimensions: 1) performance of functions; 2) responsiveness; and 3) overall contribution with resources available. A four-point Likert type scale was used to measure perceptions on each of these dimensions for 44 administrative offices. Respondents were also asked to list the strengths and weaknesses of each office. Due to the sensitivity of the data, the survey process was designed to be completely anonymous. The questionnaire contained no identification marks and respondents were asked to return a postal card separately to indicate their completion of the survey instrument.

Respondents were asked to indicate if they were a student, support staff, administrator, or faculty member on the survey form. The survey results were analyzed and presented by this subgroup variable. Each of these segments of the University community may have a different view of administrative functions. For some administrative operations, the views of one subgroup may be more important or relevant for a particular office.

¹ The 1986 survey did not include part-time faculty or staff while the 1989 survey included all part-time staff in permanent positions and a 50% random sample of adjunct faculty. In the 1986 survey, the student population was defined to include only students who had been enrolled for two consecutive semesters. In 1989, this requirement was dropped and the student population included all currently enrolled students.

² The size of the student sample was set to provide a maximum sampling error of less than 10%.

The strongest and weakest offices were identified by comparing mean scores for each of the three evaluative dimensions. Offices ranked in the top quintile were identified as **strong** and those falling in the bottom quintile were categorized as **weak** based on the perceptions of the University community. This method of analysis intentionally avoids making statements about the offices located in the middle 60% of the distribution other than to note that they were not perceived as being especially noteworthy or problematic. Attempts to make distinctions among the middle 60 percent would be more misleading than instructive. It seemed appropriate to treat these ordinal data in a conservative manner and not convey a false sense of precision, especially since the results could potentially affect personnel decisions.

FINDINGS

Response Rate

Survey response rates for each of the four subgroups for both survey administrations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Response Rate by Respondent Type

University Subgroup	Number Surveyed		Number Returned		Response Rate (%)	
	1986	1989	1986	1989	1986	1989
Faculty	122	185	118	164	96.7	88.9
Administrators	32	99	28	52	87.5	52.5
Support Staff	158	183	129	105	81.7	57.4
Students	205	299	122	133	59.5	44.5
Total	517	766	403*	499*	78.0*	65.1*

*Totals include respondents whose subgroup status could not be determined.

The level of participation in the survey has been relatively high as 65% of the total sample returned a completed survey in 1989 and 78% responded in 1986. The 13% drop in response rates between the 1986 and 1989 surveys was probably due to three primary factors. One, the 1989 survey was conducted in November-December which is the worst time of the year to conduct a survey. Two, the

1989 study included part-time employees while the '86 survey did not. Lastly, in the '86 survey, only students who had been enrolled for at least two semesters were included and the 1989 study did not use this restriction in building the student sample as all currently enrolled students had the same probability of being selected in the sample. The change in sampling procedures undoubtedly decreased the response rate in 1989 but probably decreased the potential for bias in that all employees and students were included in the study population. However, the drawback to this widening of the population is that numerous respondents do not have sufficient on-campus experience to provide meaningful feedback.

Performance Ratings

The 1989 survey results will be used to illustrate the use of the data. The *Performance of Function* rankings for each office by subgroup are presented in Table 2. Table 3 provides similar data for the *Responsiveness of Office* dimension, and Table 4 reports the findings for *Overall Contribution*. On these tables, a "+" indicates that a particular office was perceived to be among the top quintile. A "-" indicates placement in the bottom quintile. The rank column indicates the actual rank order for all subgroups combined. Ties among offices are indicated by repeating the same rank order value.

To provide a summary performance indicator for each administrative office, the rank scores (+/-) for the three dimensions in Tables 2-4 were condensed into a single measure for all subgroups in Table 5. Each time an office was ranked in the upper quintile (+) by a subgroup, a score of 1 was assigned. If an office was ranked in the bottom quintile (-), a score of -1 was assigned. Those offices in the middle 60% of the distribution were assigned a 0. Thus, the maximum score is 12 (3 dimensions X 4 subgroups) and the lowest score is -12. A 12 would indicate that all four subgroups rated the office in the top quintile for all three dimensions.

Table 2

Performance of Functions Quintile Rankings

Overall Rank	Office	Faculty	Admin Staff	Support Staff	Students	Total
1	Library	+	+	+	+	+
2	Learning Resources	+	+	+	+	+
3	Academic Computing	+	+	+	+	+
4	Inst Research	+	+	+		+
5	Payroll Office	+	+			+
6	Cashier's Office			+	+	+
7	Health Service		+		+	+
8	Counseling Center	+				+
8	Owen Confr Center			+	+	+
10	Univ Graphics	+			+	
10	Personnel Office	+	+			
12	Special Acad Pgms		+	+		
13	Registrar	+				
14	VC Acad Affairs	+	+			
15	Student Activities				+	
16	Univ Publications					
17	Mail Service					
18	Phys Plant-Grounds				+	
18	Athletics					
18	Admin Computing		+			
21	VC Univ Relations					
22	Career Center					
23	Chancellor's Office			+		
24	Student Housing			-		
24	Bookstore			+	-	
26	Multicultural Stu Aff		-			
27	Housekeeping			-		
28	Public Information					
28	Adult Commuter Serv				-	
30	Asst VC Enroll Mgt				-	
30	Recreation	-	-			
30	VC Student Affairs					
30	Phys Plant-Gen Admin	-				
34	Admissions		-	-		
35	Accounts Payable				-	-
35	VC Finance	-				-
37	Student Development				-	-
38	Alumni Office	-	-		-	-
39	Financial Aid	-			-	-
40	Work Orders/Maint	-	+	+		-
40	Purchasing Office	-	-	-		-
42	Food Service	-	+	-	-	-
43	Advising & Retent	-	-	-		-
44	Security	-	-	-	-	-

+Ranked Among Top 20%

LEGEND - Ranked Among Bottom 20%

Blank Indicates Rank in Middle 60%

Table 3

Responsiveness of Office Quintile Rankings

Overall Rank	Office	Faculty	Admin Staff	Support Staff	Students	Total
1	Library	+	+	+	+	+
2	Learning Resources	+	+	+	+	+
3	Payroll Office	+	+	+		+
3	Academic Computing	+	+	+		+
5	Inst Research		+	+		+
6	Counseling Center	+				+
7	Personnel Office	+	+			+
7	Registrar	+				+
9	Cashier's Office			+		+
9	Health Service	+	+			+
9	Owen Confr Center			+	+	+
9	Special Acad Pgms		+	+	+	+
13	Univ Graphics	+				
14	Student Activities				+	
14	Mail Service			+		
16	Univ Publications				+	
17	VC Univ Relations					
18	Phys Plant-Grounds				+	
19	Admin Computing		+		-	
19	Career Center					
21	VC Acad Affairs			-		
22	Bookstore			+	-	
22	Athletics					
24	Asst VC Enroll Mgt					
25	Housekeeping				+	
26	Student Housing					
27	Multicultural Stu Aff					
27	Adult Commuter Serv					
29	Public Information					
30	VC Student Affairs					
31	Recreation	-				
32	Chancellor's Office			-	-	
33	Alumni Office		-			
33	Student Development			-		
35	Phys Plant-Gen Admin	-	-		-	
36	VC Finance	-			-	
36	Accounts Payable	-			-	
38	Admissions		-	-		
39	Financial Aid	-	-		-	
40	Food Service			-	-	
41	Purchasing Office	-	-	-		
42	Advising & Retent	-	-	-		
43	Work Orders/Maint	-	-	-		
44	Security	-	-	-	-	-

+ Ranked Among Top 20%
 LEGEND - Ranked Among Bottom 20%
 Blank Indicates Rank in Middle 60%

Table 4

Overall Contribution With Resources Available Rankings

Overall Rank	Office	Faculty	Admin Staff	Support Staff	Students	Total
1	Library	+	+	+	+	+
2	Learning Resources	+	+	+	+	+
3	Academic Computing	+	+	+	+	+
4	Payroll Office	+				+
5	Counseling Center	+				+
6	Cashier's Office			+	+	+
7	Inst Research		+	+		+
7	Health Service	+	+		+	+
7	Owen Confr Center				+	+
10	Personnel Office	+	+			
11	Special Acad Pgms			+	+	+
11	Student Activities			+	+	
11	Univ Graphics	+		+		
14	VC Acad Affairs	+				
14	Registrar	+				
14	Mail Service			+		
17	Univ Publications					
18	Admin Computing		+			
18	Athletics		+			
20	VC Univ Relations					
21	Phys Plant-Grounds				+	
22	Career Center					
23	Multicultural Stu Aff		+			
23	Adult Commuter Serv				-	
25	Recreation					
25	Student Housing			-		
27	Bookstore			+	-	
28	Public Information					
28	Asst VC Enroll Mgt				-	
30	Housekeeping	-		-	+	
31	Phys Plant-Gen Admin	-				
32	VC Student Affairs					
33	Admissions		-	-		
33	Accounts Payable				+	
33	Chancellor's Office			+		
36	VC Finance	-			-	
37	Alumni Office		-			-
38	Student Development			-	-	-
39	Purchasing Office	-	+			-
40	Financial Aid	-	-			-
41	Work Orders/Maint	-	-	-		-
42	Food Service	-	-	-	-	-
43	Advising & Retent	-	-	-	-	-
44	Security	-	-	-	+	-

+ Ranked Among Top 20%

LEGEND - Ranked Among Bottom 20%

Blank Indicates Rank in Middle 60%

Table 5

Overall Ranking of Administrative Offices

Rank	Office	Perf of Functions	Responsiveness	Overall Contrib	Total
1	Library	4	4	4	12
1	Learning Resources	4	4	4	12
3	Academic Computing	4	3	4	11
4	Health Service	2	3	3	8
5	Special Acad Pgms	2	3	2	7
6	Inst Research	2	2	2	6
6	Payroll Office	2	3	1	6
6	Personnel Office	2	2	2	6
9	Cashier's Office	2	1	2	5
9	Owen Confr Center	2	2	1	5
9	Univ Graphics	2	1	2	5
12	Student Activities	1	1	2	4
13	Counseling Center	1	1	1	3
13	Registrar	1	1	1	3
13	Phys Plant-Grounds	1	1	1	3
16	VC Acad Affairs	2	-1	1	2
16	Mail Service	0	1	1	2
16	Admin Computing	1	0	1	2
19	Univ Publications	0	1	0	1
19	Athletics	0	0	1	1
21	VC Univ Relations	0	0	0	0
21	Career Center	0	0	0	0
21	Bookstore	0	0	0	0
21	Public Information	0	0	0	0
21	VC Student Affairs	0	0	0	0
26	Housekeeping	-1	1	-1	-1
27	Asst VC Enroll Mgt	-1	0	-1	-2
28	Student Housing	-1	-1	-1	-3
28	Multicultural Stu Aff	-1	-1	-1	-3
28	Adult Commuter Serv	-1	-1	-1	-3
28	Recreation	-2	-1	0	-3
32	Chancellor's Office	-1	-2	-1	-4
32	Accounts Payable	-1	-2	-1	-4
32	VC Finance	-1	-1	-2	-4
35	Phys Plant-Gen Admin	-1	-3	-1	-5
35	Student Development	-1	-2	-2	-5
35	Alumni Office	-3	-1	-1	-5
38	Admissions	-2	-2	-2	-6
39	Financial Aid	-2	-3	-2	-7
40	Purchasing Office	-3	-3	-2	-8
41	Work Orders/Maint	-3	-3	-3	-9
42	Food Service	-4	-2	-4	-10
42	Advising & Retent	-3	-3	-4	-10
44	Security	-4	-4	-4	-12

NOTE: Positive nos. indicate the number of times an office was ranked among the top quintile by one of the 4 subgroups. Negative nos. indicate the number of times an office was ranked in the bottom quintile. 0's indicate rank in the middle 60% of the distribution.

1986 vs. 1989 Survey Comparisons

The comparison of the 1989 survey results with the 1986 survey findings indicates how some units have improved or declined in their level of performance as perceived by the University community. However, it is important to note that these comparisons may not always be fair. Some offices may be operating under raised expectations since 1986 or may have implemented substantive improvements that are not readily apparent to the casual observer. And third, campus perceptions may not change as quickly for offices that have well established good or bad reputations. On an aggregate level, this type of analysis will also help to assess and document the degree of change in our overall administrative effectiveness over the last three years.

Individual Office Comparisons

The change ratings shown in Table 6 are based on comparing the 1989 "overall rating" (see Table 5) with the same measure for 1986. A major limitation of this analysis is that of the 44 offices listed on the '89 survey, only 25 were listed on the '86 survey in the same format. In an effort to get more meaningful feedback, many of the large units listed in the '86 (e.g. Physical Plant and Business Office) were listed by functional area in the 1989 survey. Table 6 lists the offices in descending order of positive change. It is also interesting to note the relationship between leadership changes and the distribution of rating change scores. Among 14 offices rated in the bottom quintile for at least one subgroup in either the 1986 or 1989 survey, there has been an 86% turnover rate in the leadership of these units. Among the 11 offices that received neutral or positive feedback in both survey administrations, there has been a 42% rate of leadership turnover.

Table 6

1986 vs. 1989 Overall Rating Comparison

Office	Overall Rating		Change
	1986	1989	
Registrar	-6	3	9 *
VC Academic Affairs	-3	2	5 *
Alumni Office	-9	-5	4 *
Learning Resources	8	12	4
Personnel Office	2	6	4 *^
Special Academic Programs	3	7	4 *
Food Service	-12	-10	2 *
Institutional Research	4	6	2
VC University Relations	-2	0	2 *
Financial Aid	-8	-7	1
Library	12	12	0
Public Information	0	0	0 *
VC Student Affairs	0	0	0
VC Finance	-4	-4	0 ^
Security	-12	-12	0 ^
Health Service	10	8	-2 *
Student Development	-3	-5	-2 *
Student Activities	6	4	-2
Asst VC Enrollment Mgt	1	-2	-3 *
Bookstore	3	0	-3
Student Housing	0	-3	-3
Chancellor's Office	2	-4	-6 ^
Univ Graphics	11	5	-6
Admissions	3	-6	-9 *
Advising & Retention	0	-10	-10 *^

* Department head change since 1986

^ Department head change after/during '89 data collection

Another view of the change in ratings over time is presented in Figure 1 where each office is plotted by their 1986 overall rating (vertical axis) and 1989 overall rating (horizontal axis). The plot is divided into four quadrants. Offices listed in the *upper right* received positive scores in both '86 and '89. Offices in the *lower right* have improved from negative ratings in '86 to positive scores in '89. The *lower left* quadrant contains those units that received negative ratings in both surveys. And finally, the offices in the *upper left* quadrant received positive ratings in '86 and negative scores in the current survey.

Change in Overall Administrative Ratings

These data can also be analyzed on an aggregate level to record changes in perceived administrative performance over a three year period. The findings up to this point have been based on comparing each office's rank within a given quintile distribution. The question now becomes how does the 1989 distribution of evaluation scores for all offices differ from the 1986 survey results? To address this question, Table 7 compares the percentage of offices with mean scores of "Good" or "Excellent" in 1986 with the 1989 survey by subgroup. These findings indicate a substantial improvement in UNCA administrative performance.

Table 7

Percent of Offices Rated "Good" or "Excellent"

Subgroup	<u>Perf of Functions</u>		<u>Responsiveness</u>		<u>Overall Contrib</u>	
	1986	1989	1986	1989	1986	1989
Faculty	25.0	40.9	25.0	40.9	18.8	40.9
Administrators	31.3	56.8	56.3	47.7	34.4	56.8
Support Staff	25.0	68.2	28.1	56.8	37.5	61.4
Students	12.5	54.5	6.3	43.2	12.5	50.0
Total	36.9	54.1	40.0	44.5	38.8	57.5

Organizational Climate

In an effort to assess how UNCA employees feel about their work environment, the survey contained five items designed to assess the organizational climate. These items and the percent that agree to each statement are shown in Table 8. The responses to these items are very positive and indicate a great deal of satisfaction with the UNCA work environment. Written comments seemed to indicate that employees are more positive about the organizational climate in their department than the larger University administrative environment. It will be important to monitor changes in these items in future surveys of this type.

Table 8

Organizational Climate Ratings

Dimension	Employee Group						All Employees	
	Support Staff		Administrators		Faculty			
	N	Percent Agree	N	Percent Agree	N	Percent Agree	N	Percent Agree
I feel free to make recommendations for constructive change	97	78.4	50	82.0	157	86.6	304	83.2
I feel that I am treated fairly as an employee	98	81.6	52	94.2	155	89.7	305	87.9
I generally feel things are changing for the better	87	75.9	50	82.0	143	81.1	280	79.6
I generally get the support I need to perform my job well	96	83.3	51	78.4	155	78.7	302	80.1
UNCA is the right place for me to be employed	89	92.1	51	94.1	147	91.8	287	92.3

Survey Comments

The open-ended responses provided a powerful source of qualitative information. Respondents were asked to list "strengths" and "weaknesses" for each office and to identify areas in general in which the University needs to make the most improvement. A total of 3,694 comments were recorded on the 1989 survey. The comments were transcribed exactly as written and listed for each office by subgroup as a perceived strength or weakness. The comments provided University administrators with a rich source of evaluative feedback. Many offices were able to glean ideas for improved practice and communications with students, staff, and faculty. The comments can also be a useful indicator of campus visibility and the degree to which an office's role and function are understood. For the offices ranked in the top or bottom quintiles, the comments generally provide a good deal of detail to explain an office's high or low rating.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study attempted to provide an empirical mechanism, based on perceptual data, for identifying the strongest and weakest administrative offices. There are several advantages to this

approach. One, it provides a lot of useful information for a modest cost. Two, the process can work within the existing management structure. The survey results can be linked to personnel changes, new training programs, new methods of communicating information, and improved office procedures. The results have been used in individual performance appraisals and to establish office goals. University administrators have also indicated that the survey has helped to provide cues in allocating resources. Perhaps the most significant impact of the process is that the statistical results are made public which creates considerable motivation to improve problem areas. On a broader level, the study has been successful in heightening the general campus awareness of University's commitment to provide quality service to its "customers" and had the added benefit of demonstrating an open organization interested in improving.

In reviewing offices perceived to be "strong" or "weak" or those at the top and bottom quintiles, it is possible that these rankings do not reflect reality or actual performance. However, these results do provide an accurate snapshot of an office's image. In cases where these rankings do not match reality, there is a strong need to develop a full understanding of the reasons for this gap. Follow-up interviews with senior University administrators indicate that the process is sometimes painful, but a very useful management tool. As we prepare our University self-study for regional accreditation, these data have proven to be extremely useful in identifying both problem areas that need improvement and noting areas of strength.

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